

The "Witches" of Salem, Massachusetts: Part 2

By Joyce Furstenau

Caption: "The House Where Witchcraft Started, Now Danvers, Mass.," photographer unknown. Source: "Witchcraft Illustrated" by Henrietta D. Kimball, Geo. A. Kimball, Publisher, Boston, 1892.



After lengthy questioning, both Mrs. Good and Mrs. Osborn denied ever using witchcraft. Neither of them actually knew the girls. Neither of them was given counsel during these sessions. The questioning continued. The girls were required to face both women and point out the person or persons who had "afflicted" them. The girls pointed at all three women: Tituba, Mrs. Osborn, and Mrs. Good. The women were taken away and put into irons in a Boston prison. The sixty-year-old Mrs. Osborn died in prison on May 10, 1692.

The attention given the young girls had by now gone to their heads. They were enjoying the notoriety. They saw these women being carried off to jail and appeared to become more arrogant than ever. There were several more accusations before it was over. Interestingly enough, the witness who kept record of several of these "examinations" was the Reverend Sam Parris.

The girls began to embellish their "possession" with fits, fainting, and dramatic carrying on. They began accusing more and more women of "afflicting" them. The offenses ranged from pinching, pricking, and poking, to murder. Several of the women accused were often the town's least desirable residents. Some were members of the church in high standing.

Because the town of Salem still did not have a charter under its new leadership, they did not have a court in which to try their prisoners. The prisoners were held in shackles in Boston until a court could be convened. On May 14, 1692, Sir William Phipps arrived in Salem with the town's charter. The Massachusetts governor appointed eight men to be in charge of court proceedings. The first session of court was held on June 2, 1692. By the time court convened, there were sixty-two people in custody for witchcraft.

The first to be tried was a woman named Brigit Bishop. The children present in the courtroom fell into fits when she entered. It must have been quite a show for those present. All the misfortunes that ever happened to anyone who knew Mrs. Bishop were blamed upon crossing her path. One man testified that she paid him three pence for a chore. He put the money in his pocket and left. After walking a few miles, he put his hand in his pocket and the money was gone. He said he believed she had used witchcraft to take the money back. All sorts of ailments were blamed on Mrs. Bishop's presence. She was accused of causing bad dreams and bad fortune as well as the death of a Mrs. Trask who was thought to have committed suicide. She was found guilty and sentenced to death by hanging, all without benefit of legal counsel.

By the time Sarah Good came to trial, this fear-charged, suspicious community was no doubt incapable of rational thought. Accusations against Mrs. Good ranged from the same biting, pinching, and pricking to causing the mysterious deaths of cows. They even called upon her five-year-old daughter to testify against her. Her daughter testified that her mother had three birds that were sent to prick and hurt those who had accused her. Sarah Good was found guilty and sentenced to death by hanging.

Rebecca Nurse was the third woman to go on trial facing the same accusations as the others. After considerable testimony was taken, Mrs. Nurse was at first found "not guilty." The judge instructed the jury to "go back and reconsider the case." It was as if the judge believed their decision was a mistake. When they returned, she was found guilty and sentenced to death by hanging. The execution was carried out on July 19, 1692, at Gallows Hill.

This was only the beginning. Each month a new list of people were indicted. The proceedings were moved from Salem to Andover, Massachusetts. Some of the accused actually confessed. Men's names were added to the

Name _____



Date _____

list of offenders. More grand juries were sworn in and more guilty sentences were handed out. On August 19, 1692, Martha Carrier, George Jacobs, Sr., George Burroughs, John Willard, and John Procter were hanged. Eighteen more were indicted in September. On September 22, 1692, eight more of those convicted were hanged.

Much of the evidence used against those convicted was termed "spectral evidence." This meant that the accused individual was not actually present, but a vision of them had appeared in a dream. Opponents claimed that the devil was able to use anyone's "shape" to afflict people. The court held that the devil could not use a person's shape without that person's permission. This was the "evidence" that claimed the lives of twenty-four innocent people.

In October of 1692, the use of spectral evidence was questioned. The governor soon ordered that spectral evidence no longer be used in trials. By January of 1693, forty-nine people imprisoned for witchcraft were released. Their arrests were all based on spectral evidence. From then on, most of the cases of witchcraft brought before the courts were thrown out. In May of 1693, the governor, wanting to put an end to the entire episode, proclaimed a "general jail deliver of pardon." It would be years before any apologies were made to the surviving victims. The wounds of this witch-hunt had left a scar upon Salem.

On May 9, 1992, the town of Danvers and the City of Salem dedicated permanent witch victim memorials. Present day visitors to Salem can see the documents pertaining to the trials at the Peabody Essex Museum. They can tour the Witch Museum, and see Gallows Hill, all chilling reminders that nothing good comes from intolerance.

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Questions

1. Which of the accused women died in prison on May 10, 1692?

- _____ 2. Which of these women was the first to go to trial?

A. Sarah Osborn
B. Sarah Good
C. Brigit Bishop
D. Rebecca Nurse

- _____ 3. Which of these men was accused of being a witch?

A. William Phipps
B. Samuel Parris
C. William Griggs
D. George Burroughs

4. What was the punishment for those found guilty of witchcraft?

Date _____

_____ 5. What is "spectral evidence"?

- A. using a spectator in the courtroom for evidence
- B. a person that has evidence of special powers
- C. the person had appeared to the victim in a dream
- D. having several spectators watching the trial

6. Where are the court documents of this event located?

What do you think was wrong with "the system" at this time? Explain why you think this situation got so out of control. Do you think this situation can or would ever happen again today? Explain why or why not.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.